

T.A.I.

Traditional Arts Indiana



Fall 2010

Dear TAI Supporters,

Community is a primary focus for Traditional Arts Indiana. This special issue of our TAI magazine centers of various communities around our state. From the small town of Pekin, which boasts of the oldest continual Fourth of July celebration in the United States to the growing refugee community from Burma who continue to celebrate Chin National Day, in their new home in Indianapolis, traditional arts are used to unite communities and celebrate a shared heritage. Communities can grow out of geographic boundaries, religious beliefs, ethnic identity, occupational skills and/or special interests. As you read this issue, think about the groups represented and how music, crafts, stories, foods and other traditional arts are powerful tools for strengthening relationships and building communities.

Looking to the Future,



Jon Kay, Director Traditional Art Indiana

TAI Staff Bios



Anna Batcheller
(Communications and Exhibit Curator) is studying folklore/ethnomusicology and journalism at IU, focusing on photography, multimedia, and issues of representation. She has freelanced and worked for newspapers, newsletters, magazines and folklore organizations.



Kara Bayless
(Digital Communications Coordinator) is a M.A. /M.L.S. student in folklore and library science. She researches the uses of folklore in elementary education, Russian fairy tales, Baba Yaga, and Ukrainian/Russian embroidery and material culture.



Suzanne Godby Ingalsbe
(Rotating Exhibit Network Coordinator) is a Ph.D. candidate in folklore with a minor in museum studies. She researches sacred spaces, material culture and issues of display, and focuses her public sector work in museums and folklore organizations.



James O'Dea
(Intern) is a senior majoring in anthropology with a certificate in African Studies and a minor in Bamana. He is working on the Second Servings podcast series.



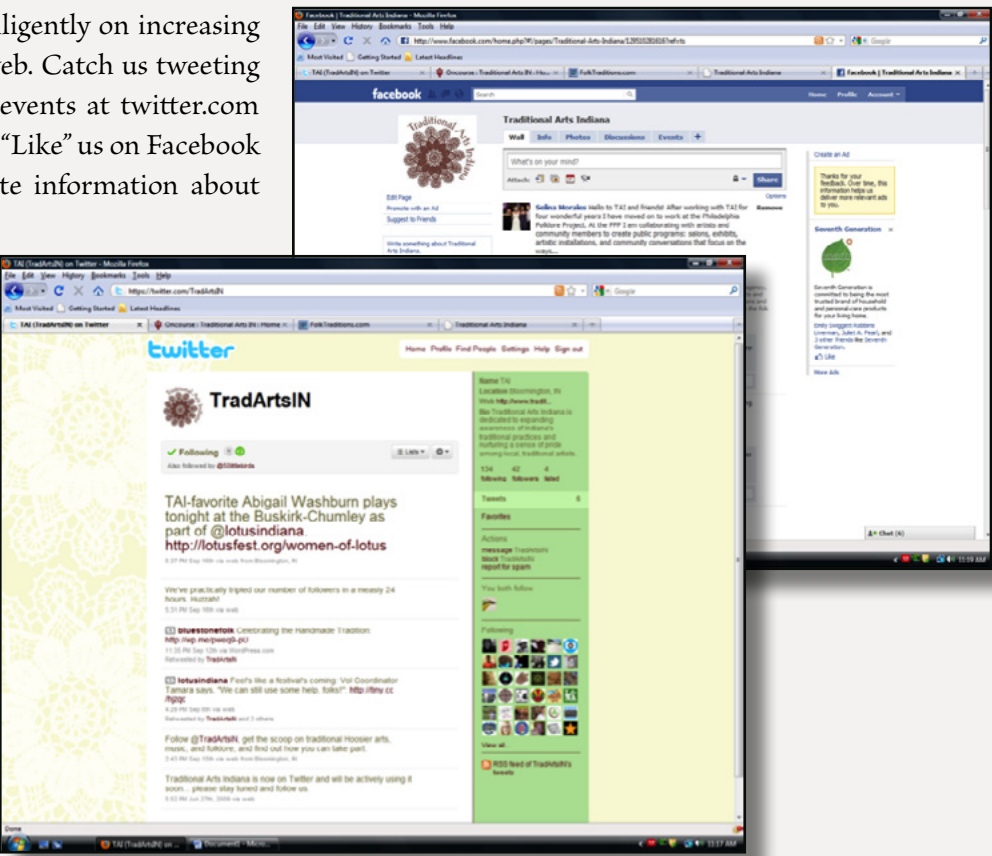
Kate Schramm
(Rotating Exhibit Network Coordinator) is a Ph.D. student in folklore. She researches community ritual and festival, the supernatural, and issues of identity. She spent the past year surveying Japanese traditional artists in Indiana, both within and outside of the Japanese-speaking community.

Work-study students

Chad Buterbaugh, Aaron Comforty, Hannah Davis, Chris Jacob, Perry McAninch, (Juan) Sebastian Ramirez and Luke Zimmer

This fall, TAI is working diligently on increasing our presence on the web. Catch us tweeting short updates about programs and events at twitter.com (“TradArtsIN” and “folktraditions”). “Like” us on Facebook (facebook.com) to receive up-to-date information about what’s going on at TAI and to share your favorite local traditions, stories and memories.

Also be on the lookout at traditionalartsindiana.com for a new website with fresh, updated interface, useful resources, and information on our current programs and upcoming events. Learn about a recent survey conducted in Steuben County on folktraditions.com, with artists such as apple grower Gary Stroh, chainsaw carver Scott Lepley, gourd artist Cassandra Chorpenning, and folk and bluegrass musician John Getz.



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TAI Credits

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Main Street Stage

TAI hosted a day of bluegrass performances on the Main Street Stage. This year the Not Too Bad Bluegrass Band (NTB3) and the Reel Tyme String Band performed two lively sets each to a tent filled with appreciative audience members of all ages. Many listeners took advantage of the opportunity to chat with band members and TAI staff between sets.

NTB3, whose members hail from three southern Indiana counties, gave the audience a preview of the performance they'll be giving in Washington, D.C. in October when Doug Harden (mandolin), Brian Lappin (banjo), Greg Norman (bass), Brady Stogdill (guitar), and Kent Todd (fiddle) will perform at the Library of Congress and the Kennedy Center. Brown County's Reel Tyme String Band, including members Dan Harden (banjo), Chris Bryan (guitar), Rick Hedrick (guitar), Brandon Lee (mandolin and guitar), and Loretta Vinson (bass and vocals), shared tracks from their new CD, Lonesome Town. Both bands served as great ambassadors for Indiana's bluegrass tradition, sharing the music with long-time fans and first-time listeners alike.

State Fair Masters:
Drake Purebred Farms



Wayne and Helen Drake have been involved in hog breeding and showing at the state fair for four decades. Wayne says "the people" are most meaningful to him, and he tells stories of fellow farmers he has known for years, tricks learned from the "old-timers," and the respect he has for the truly great breeders.

Photos: Thomas Richardson



Fiddle Contest

Fiddlers and fiddle enthusiasts braved the August heat to participate in this year's Traditional Arts Indiana Fiddle Contest. Each contestant performed three selections (a waltz, a hoedown and a third piece of the contestant's choosing) within a time limit of five minutes. This year's performers favored a bluegrass playing style, but also included swing, Celtic, and novelty tunes in their repertoires.

Connor McCracken (Fredericksburg, IN) took first place in the 11 & Under Division.

Cole McCracken (Fredericksburg, IN) won first place in the 12—17 Division.

Doug Fleener (Leitchfield, KY) took first place in the 18—59 Division.

Ed Cosner, Sr. (Portage, IN) won first place in the 60 & Above Division.

Harold Kloster Kemper also won the Special Old Time Fiddling Award, a prize given to a player who exhibits mastery of a non-bluegrass "old time" aesthetic.

To close out the event, winners gave encore performances, and each of the three judges (Carolyn Dutton, Bradley Leftwich and Kent Todd) played a selection. Afterwards, participants collected their ribbons, wrapped up their jam sessions, and put away their instruments, many expecting to see each other again at next year's contest.



Photos: Jon Kay and Joseph O'Connell

“The Feeling of the Rope”: What is Community?

CONTINUITY

“It goes back to connections. Hatsumi-sensei [leader of the Bujinkan in Japan] is actually always talking about this nawa no kankaku, the “feeling of the rope.” He’s always talking about the things you’re connected to. With our dojo, the point is always trying to pass the teaching along, as pure as you can... But having that connection back to Japan, back to the source.”

--Jay Zimmerman (Fort Wayne), Bujinkan martial artist

“Soke says, ‘All art is the same.’ If you study only for you, you will always stop. You have to study for people who came before us and after us and right now.”

--Dean Houser (Fort Wayne), Bujinkan martial artist

COMMITMENT

“It is unusual in Japan to find a group like ours.”

--Yaoko Covillon, member of Indianapolis Minyo Dancers, Inc.

For hours the dancers practice in kimono (many made by group members), rehearsing New Dance style routines melding traditional Japanese folk and classical forms under Toshiko Buck’s good-humored instruction. The group, dedicated to “Opening a Gateway” of understanding between Japan and the U.S., has been dancing together since 1976 and welcomes similarly minded dancers to their ranks.



CREATIVITY

“What I am doing... it’s just because I love doing it. What you’re learning while you’re doing this is that you’re doing artwork as well, interpreting the story; you’re an illustrator; you have to really break it down into components to make up a song; you’re doing poetry and composing and music.”

--Dorothy Kittaka (Fort Wayne), Japanese paper theatre (kamishibai) artist



CONNECTION

“You can follow somebody’s blog in Chile with a translation from Google, and know what they’re talking about, and see amazing works of art, and learn from that, and become friends with people from around the world, really easy.”

--Brian Webb (Indianapolis), Indiana Regional Origami Network of Folders



COOPERATION

“They support me, and I support them.”

--Mineko Grunow (Indianapolis), leader of the Okinawa YuYuKai (“Fun and Friendship Association”).

YuYuKai literally means “Fun and Friendship Association,” and the group is dedicated to preserving, experiencing, and promoting Okinawan cultural heritage. Together, the members practice Eisa, Okinawa’s legendary drum dance, to the sound of the three-stringed sanshin (Okinawan shamisen). Members also have opportunities to rehearse the more sedate ryubu dance, take sanshin lessons, or learn some of Mineko-san’s delicious recipes incorporating Okinawan vegetables.



Photos: Jon Kay



Photos: Joseph O'Connell

When I tell people that I am from Pekin, Indiana, they rarely recognize the name. It falls to me to locate and explain the place—a difficult task to do well. One customary way of identifying Pekin is by its Independence Day festivities. The town officially boasts the oldest consecutive 4th of July celebration, dating its event to 1830. Today, the celebration and its centerpiece parade remain important public occasions, grounding senses of local community and cultural tradition in shared experience. Watching the parade in 2010, I tried to remember what it was like to be in the procession with my little league baseball team. This year, I returned to the parade in a new capacity. As part of my survey of Washington County, I conducted interviews with celebration participants on topics that ranged from competitive horseshoe pitching to stunt car driving. In the following excerpt, drummer Scott Miller discusses his early introduction to the Spirit of '76 Band, a marching fife and drum ensemble started in the 1950s that Miller has helped continue through the present.

“On the 4th of July sometimes my grandfather would bring me down to the celebration before the parade. He was the type of person who pretty much knew everyone around—one of those outgoing types. One of his good friends was the late Frank Neil, who played drums with the old Spirit of '76 Band. That's the old band that rode through the parade in a pickup truck. He'd bring me up and introduce me to the guys, and I thought that was so great. I looked at that and I thought, that's just it right there, I'd like to do that some day. I don't know what it takes to get there but I'm going to try some day. When they'd break into a song after granddad got done talking to them it just chilled me. It really would set off that certain something in me that gave me the desire to try.”

-- Joseph O'Connell



A few weeks ago in Shipshewana, IN, Jon Kay interviewed Lavern Miller, a coffin maker for the Amish families in that community. Below is an excerpt from their interview, where Miller talks about learning his craft and the importance of holding to this community tradition. J: So Laverne, how did you get started making caskets again?

L: Well, back when I was 15, a local casket/furniture maker was looking for an apprentice, basically for the business. I happened to enjoy woodworking and started working for him for \$1.75 an hour. So, it just kind of grew from there.

J: Who all do you make caskets for?

L: Mostly, directly for the families in the surrounding area, the Amish community. Probably 90% of our sales are directly with families that are in need of a casket. The rest would be directly to the funeral homes. But, mostly to the families.

J: What is distinctly different about the way that caskets are made for the Amish community?

L: Well, the Amish casket is really a coffin, which means it has six sides. The funeral directors call them toe-pinchers, because they're narrow on the head

end and the foot end. Your traditional casket is a rectangular box. That's the difference between a casket and a coffin. A coffin is a six-sided box.

J: And is that just a local preference or tradition?

L: That's a tradition. I really don't know when that style started, but Jonathan is the guy that made the caskets before I did, and it's been handed down. I don't know how many hands it's been through until it reached my point, but that's basically the same style that's been used ever since the Amish were in the area.

J: You said that when you first learned from him, he was a furniture maker and also made coffins on the side. Can you tell me about that?

L: He was a furniture maker, and he did make the coffins for the Amish community. Then, we got inquiries about making a traditional casket for the non-Amish, and we kind of delved into that and it's grown from there. That's been probably 20 or 25 years ago that we started making the non-Amish caskets.

The Amish coffin is a poplar, a tulip poplar, and the traditional caskets are pine, oak, also poplar, walnut, and cherry. And we do use different species if we get a special order. If people

request it, we use any species of wood, but that's our main, basic line.

J: What would an Amish funeral be like? Is it any different than an “English” funeral?

L: No, not really. The only thing is after services we view again, before the actual burial. Everybody files past the casket after the services, and the non-Amish would not do that. People view from both sides, because quite often there is a huge group of people that come to the viewing and visitation. Therefore, by having the casket with the lids laying back instead of opening up like the traditional casket, you can actually run two lines--a line on each side of the casket, if you need to speed things up a little.

J: What's the future of this? Do you have an apprentice of your own in sight?

L: Well, my two sons are working for me. The oldest one takes a pretty good interest in it, but the youngest one would rather be out in the fields somewhere. But, yeah he will probably continue this tradition.

J: You use that word ‘tradition’ quite a bit. How is that important to you?

L: Well, it's important. Now, take the style of casket, the coffin, for the Amish community. It's important to me to keep that style. I call that a tradition. It's important for me to keep that style. Now, we have made some slight changes in measurements only, but the actual design has remained the same. And that's important for me that it remains that way after I leave.



A hlanlio ah hin khua pakhat ah, nufa hna pahnih an um ti a si. A fanute a min cu Nga Tai ti a si. Nga Tai cu aa dawh-tuk ah hin a pum cungah sawiding pakhatmanh a umlo ti a si. A mui aa dawhtuk tikah a hmu mipoh nih an duh dih. Nga Tai an hmuhpoh ahhin an thinlung zong hi a nuam ti a si.

Voikhath cu an khua ah ruapi a sur ciammam ii tivate he, tivapi he ti kha a lian dih. An khuachung vialte kha tinih a chilhdih tikah, mi vialte cu tlang sandeuhnakh ah khan heh tiah an kai ti a si. Ti cu a thang chin lengmang. Ti cu a vun than lengmang pah khin “Tai Tai” ti khin a awn ti a si. Khuami pawl cu an kharuah kha a hartuk ii, mahhi ti hi “Tai Tai” tiah a timi hi Nga Tai a duh ii a siko lai tiah an ruah ti a si. Khi tikah, Nga Tai samfang pakhat te kha an phawi ii ti chung ahcun an thlak. Mah samfang pakhat te an vun thlak khan ti cu “Tai” tiah voikhath te khi a awn ii tlawpal a zordeuh ti a si.

A sinain, tlawmpal ah ti cu a thang than lengmang. Khuami cu an khuarauh a har ii, Nga Tai thilri vialte cu pakhat hnu pakhat an thlak ti a si. Thil an thlak fatin, ti cu a zordeuh lengmang. Cu ticun, Nga Tai thil vialte cu pakhatmanh tanglo in an thlak dih. A sinain, tlawmpal ah ti cu “Tai Tai Tai” a ti ii a rak thang than lengmang.

Mah tikah khan, mi zapi cu an khuaruah a hartuk. A zeiti a sihmanh ah mah ti hi Nga Tai pei a duh ko hi an ti ii Nga Tai kha ti chungah peihding in an timh ti asi. Nga Tai nu cu a ngeih a chiattuk ii a fanu Nga Tai cu fekte in a kuhchih. A fanu ti chung ii peihnakh sacun, mizapi an thih hmanh kha a duh deuh. Mi zapi nih cun thih kha an duhcio lo tikah khan, Nga Tai tu kha a nu tak chung khan heh tiah an chuhchih. Cu ticun, Nga Tai nu cu a tah ai pahbu in a fanu cu ti chungah cun an thlak. Nga Tai tichung a pil thluahmah lio ah a nu nih.

“Ee ka fanu ka sianlo te, nang kha ngami ah hung i cang law, kei kha cite ah ka rak i cang lai. Zingtha Zing¹ ah kan i tongte lai” tiah a tah. Nga Tai cu ti chungah cun a liam thluahmah. Ti chung a hun liam thluahmah lio ah, ti zong cu a zor thluahmah ve ti a si.

Nga Tai tichung an thlak hnu cun, a nu cu a ngeih a chiattuk ahhin, inn um zong kha a zuam tilo. Ngeihchiat-lunglen in, khua zakip ah a vai. Thlang sang kip ah a kai ii fing-le-tlang kip khi a cuan. A len a vahpahbu khan nikhat cu khua a ruat ii, umharphen ah thiamtial ka bang lai a ti ii, tlang khat le tlang khat dan in thiamtial cu a bang ti a si. A thiam banmi cu va phunkip nih khan an bomh ii thiam cu an bangti ti a si. [Thantlang peng ii a ummi Tombuk Tlang khi, mi nih a tutiang hi “Nga Tai Nu Thiamtlang” tiah an auh.]

Thiamtial a ban hnu zong ah cun Nga Tai Nu cu a lunglen a dam hleilo. Umhar lileng in fing-le-tlang kipah a vai tthan. A hnu ah Senthang peng lei ah a phan ti a si. Senthang peng hrawng ii a vaihlio ah, Nga Tai Nu cu a thi ii lungpi ah aa cang ti a si. Kha lungpi cu minung pungsan khi a lo ii, nu muisam a keng fawn anti. Lungpi chung khan ti a chuak ii, kha ti kha mi nih an chuan tikah cite ah aa cang. A tutiang kha cite khor cu “Senthang Cikhor” tiah an ti.

Kha citekhor chung in, cite hang an thang tikpoh ah khan, “ba hlaw hlork, ba hla w hlork” ti khin a awn tawn ti a si. Kha a awnhmi kha a nih a chuak ii, a nihsawh mipoh cu inn an phak le cangka te khan an thi ti a si. Mahti a si ahcun kan thi dih lai hita an ti ii a hnu ah, cite hang cu tidong saupi in lam hlapi ah an lak ii, cite cu an chuan ti a si. [A tutiang cite cu Senthang peng lei ah cun an chuan korieh]. Nga Tai zong cu ngami ah cun aa cang.

Ngami cu nu muisam khi a keng ii a hnuk tehna zong khi nu a lo ti a si. Lailei cu a caancaan, zarhtha zing tehna lawng ah khin rawl thaw cu kan chuan ii, sa le cite cu eiti a si cu muu. Cu ticun, Nga Tai le a nu cu Zingtha Zing ah cun an i tong ttheu tawn ee an ti.

-- ***Narrated by Thiang Ceu Nu (Esther Pi), Indianapolis***

Long, long ago in a land far away, there lived a mother and her lovely daughter named Nga Tai. Nga Tai, a flawless beauty, was so sweet and kind that everyone in the village adored her. Her tantalizing almond eyes sparkled like the twinkling stars, and her dark, long hair was as shiny as silk. Her graceful demeanor and elegance warmed everyone around her.

One monsoon season, a heavy rain started to fall. As big and small streams began to swell and the water flooded into the village, the villagers had to move up into the mountains. The floodwaters made an unusual sound— “Tai Tai Tai”—as they grew. The panicked village elders were convinced that the water was calling for Nga Tai to make a sacrifice. So they plucked one beautiful strand of Nga Tai’s hair and threw it into the raging flood.

Look! The water receded a little. But before long, it began rising up again, calling, “Tai Tai Tai.” So the villagers threw Nga Tai’s shirt into the water. The flood receded temporarily, but again it rose and said, “Tai Tai Tai.” Then, one by one the villagers started throwing Nga Tai’s clothes into the raging flood until she had nothing left. The water would recede every time they threw in Nga Tai’s clothes, but kept rising afterwards, getting closer and closer to them.

The people were terrified. They had no doubt that the water wanted nothing but Nga Tai herself. They said, “It’s better to sacrifice one life than to lose all.” So they planned to throw poor Nga Tai, shaken with fear, into the water. Her mother Nga Tai Nu¹ cried desperately, holding tightly on to Nga Tai and refusing to let her go. She would rather let the whole village drown than let go of her sole daughter. But her fragile arms were easily overpowered by the people’s strength. They pulled her daughter away and threw her into the water. As she watched Nga Tai drown, she wailed, “O my dear daughter, I never want to let you go. You will become Ngami (a fish that resembles a woman), and I will become a grain of salt. We will meet again on the sacred morning.”² As Nga Tai sank slowly into the flood, the water began to recede. Soon, the flood was over.

After the unbearable loss of her daughter, Nga Tai Nu no longer wanted to live in the village. She roamed in the wilderness up high in the mountains and gazed wistfully over the scenery. Her loneliness and boredom didn’t cease, so one day she decided to loom colorful tapestries. Her long, large loom stretched from one mountain to another. Several kinds of birds flew over to help her weave.

Even today, Tombuk Mountain in Thantlang township is called “Nga Tai Nu’s Looming Mountain” by many people. But loneliness kept the inconsolable mother wandering from place to place until she settled in Senthang region, a part of Haka township in Chin State, where she passed away. She became a salt rock that resembled a woman’s body, and eventually a salt pond formed around her.

The villagers nearby began making salt from the pond, heating the salty water in a big pot over the fire until all the water evaporated and left salt in the bottom. Sometimes the ond made a bubbling noise, “baw-hlaw-hlawrk.” If anyone made fun of that noise, or laughed at it, they would die as soon as they arrived home. Because they were afraid of this curse, the people later irrigated the pond to a place further away and made salt. The salt pond is now called “Senthang Cikhor,” which means Senthang Salt Pond. Some salt waters flow into a creek and stream nearby. And so mother and daughter meet again.

To this day, when people eat Ngami fish with salt they recall Nga Tai Nu’s lamentation over her daughter: “You will become Ngami, and I a grain of salt.”

1. Nga Tai is the name of the woman, and Nga Tai Nu is her mother. “Nu” means mother.
2. Chin families saved special meat, fish or chicken for sacred days such as a Harvest Feast, New Years and Christmas.
3. Nga Tai Nu’s Looming Mountain is between Tlangpi and Thantlang Farraun villages, Thantlang Township, Chin State, Western Burma.
4. Salt ponds still exist around Chawncum and Keizuan villages, Senthang region in Haka Township, Chin State, Western Burma.

Photos: Anna Batcheller



“We the Chin people are helping each other, one another. So, for example, here in the community, there are pastors, elders, deacons. They take their church members to employers whenever they have time. ... The Chin people are very quick in learning. In Burma, you know, they never worked in factories. They had no environment with machines and these telephone things. But when they are told by their team leader and supervisor in the new work place, they easily learn things. I am impressed by them so much.”

-- *Thlasui “Sui” Tluangneh*

“Kannih Chin miphun pawl hi pakhat le pakhat kan i bowm. Tahchunnak ah, kan community chung ah pastor te, Khrihfa upa te an um, tlangtla khotu upa an um. Hi hna pawl nih, caan an pek khawhchung in, an mah le mempercio kha rian ah an kalpi hna. Chin pawl hi an thluak zong a rang. Kawlram ah sehzung zong ah an tuan ballo. Seh thilri tepawl, telephone tepawl zong an tawng ballo. A sinain, an upa te supervisor tenih an chimh hna ii, fawite’n an thiam ko. Ka khuaruah an ka harh ttheu tawn.” --*Thlasul “Sui” Tluangneh*

“Most people from my country—the refugee people—can’t read English. Like their food stamp statement, their bank statement, and even their invoice from electric department, they don’t understand. So I explain it to them and translate for them.”

-- *Than Hre*

“Kan ram in a rami—refugee a tamdeuh cu Mirangca an rel kho hnalo. An foodstamp ca te hna, bank ca tehna, an electric bill tehna khi an fiang kho tawnlo. A sikhawh chung in ka leh piakpah lengmang hna.” --*Than Hre*

“I work at the CVS warehouse. I like it a little. My work is very hard. In Burma, I ran a pharmacy. Here, my children have a good education. I am very glad to live in America.”

-- *Daw Dwe*

“CVS warehouse ah ka tuan. Ka uartuk cu a silo. Ka rian cu a harbak. Kawlram ah cun si dawr te khi ka hei tuah. Hika ahhin cun, kan fale pawl hi thate’n ca an cawng kho hna. America um cu ka lawm bak ko.” --*Daw Dwe*



Photos: Anna Batcheller



“We come from the same village. We dated over the phone until we met again in the States. After two months, we said, ‘I love you.’ Our parents agreed to the marriage, so it will be blessed. We want to help those back in Chin State.” -- *Thun Thun & Par Ku*



“Khuakhat kan si. U.S ii kan i tawn hlanchung cu telephone in bia kan phai. Thla-hnih hnu ah “Kan duh” timi bia sunglawi kan i chim veve. Kan nu kan pa le zong nih, hna an kan tlakpi, hi ruang ah thlachuah kan tong lai tiah ruah a si. Chin ram ii kal takmi hna bowmchanh kan duh hna.” --*Thun Thun & Par Ku*



When I put Justin Bieber on, they were yelling very much, like “Yeah! Justin Bieber!!”

“I came from Chin to Malaysia to Chicago to Indiana. When I left for Malaysia, I was three years old. I took this picture because they were making a secret for three of us. We were talking about our friends and when we go on the bus. This is at house church. On Saturdays, we used to go to people’s house for church. I was reading a Bible right before this.

“Three of my friends and I love Justin Bieber very much because he’s a good singer. We always dance when we sing his songs. My friend and I were kind of yelling and we were in a little bit of trouble for that. The four of us were holding our hands and shaking our hair, and we were so dancing. When I put Justin Bieber on, they were yelling very much, like “Yeah! Justin Bieber!!” I was plugging my ears, but I was still yelling a little bit too. Because I kind of really love Justin Bieber.”

-- Helen lang, age 8

“Chin ram in Malaysia ah, cun Chicago ah, cun Indiana ah ka ra. Malaysia kan kal ah kum-thum ka si. Hi hmanthlak ka thlknak cu kan pathum ca’h thil thuhmi te an tuahlio a si cuh. Kan hoi le he Bus in kan kallio kong khi kan ceih ko cuh. Mahhi cu muu, mi inn kan i pumhnak ah a si. Zarhteni fate cu, mi inn ah kan i pum hna cuh. Pumhnak ah Bible ca ka rel ve.

“Ka hoi le pa-thum he Justin Bieber kan uar ningcu! hlasak a thiamtuk cu ta. A hla kan sak poh ahhin kan lam lai cuh. Ka hoi le he cun kan auchih ii, a paw pah tawn. Kan pali cun kan kut kan i tlai hna ii, kan sam kan leichih, kan lamchih. Justin Bieber hla ka chuah fatin, ka hoi le cu thangpi hin, “Yeah! Justin Bieber!!” tiah an au chih. A caan-can ah ka hnakhaw kaa phih, a sinain ka auchih ve. Justin Bieber kan uartuk ca’h a si cuh.”



“You should go to Burma. The government is just bad. Everything about Burma is so beautiful. I still want to go back to Burma. I don’t think I will be able to live there. I’ve been here since I was little, in this environment and culture. My dad has asylum status. Political asylum. I’m not a refugee. That’s just how it works. We can’t go back there.

“I guess in every family, we are close and bound together. The oldest (my dad) is the most respected person whenever they make a big decision or a big move, or change anything in your life. They will come and talk to each other, usually at the oldest person’s house. It’s not like a meeting, but we all gather around and resolve—”What should we do?”

-- Sophia Par, age 19



We all gather around and resolve-- ‘What should we do?’

“Kawlram ah kal ve hmanh uh. A cozah tu cu a chiabak henta. Kawlram aa dawhnak cu a tamtuk ko na in. Khikalei ka um kho tilai ti cu ka ruat tilo. Ka hmette in hika an nunning le an tlawnlennak ah ka umve cang cumuu. Ka pa hi political asylum in a ummi a si. Kei cu refugee ka silo. Ka heira ve ko. Kir thanding tu cu a har cang.

“Chungkhar poh ah an sidih lai tiah ka ruah, kan karlak ah fek tein pehtleihnak a um. Upabik (kapa) hi upatbikmi le zei tuahpoh ah, hmailei nunnak ca ii aa thleng khomi thil pipa ca zongah bia khiaktu a si. Cingla-rualchan khuakhan lairel tik zongah upabikmi inn ah i tawn ii, ‘Zei tin kan tuah lai?’ tiah khuakhan a si.”



“My name is Thawngthathawng Lian, the legal name here, but I go by Gideon. It’s easier. It’s always a problem to fill out the form. They don’t have that much space for me.

“My life is pretty simple. On weekdays, I go to school. On the weekend, I hang out with my friends in the community. Most Saturday nights I go and practice choir at church. Sunday we go to church. After church we hang out or play soccer. That’s the basic life.



“So far we are isolated. It could be because of the language. Most of the people who come here who are my age don’t speak English very well. To hang out with others outside the community, we don’t know the culture. Generally we grew up in different parts of the world, and we have different interests.”

-- Gideon Lian, age 19

“Ka min taktak cu Thawngthathawng Lian a si, nain, Gideon tiah ka hman deuh. A fawideuh fawn. Form phih tikah a paw ttheu tawn. Catlap blank ah ka min aa tlum tawnlo.

“Zeipi ngai tuahmi ka ngeilo. Ca-cawnni poh ah siangin ka kai. Week-end poh ah kanmah community chung ka hoi le he kan lengti. Zarhteni zaan ah choir ka cawng pah tawn. Zarhpini ah ka pum. Pumh dihnun ah kan leng, a silo le pumpaluh kan chuih. A phungmen nundan te khi a si.

“A tutiang cu, lileng in kan um. Kan holh ruang deuh ah a si khomen. Hika a rami keimah tthirual a tamdeuh cu Mirang holh an thiamtuk hna lo. Mi phundang he lenti dingah cun, an nunphung kan thei fawn lo. A fawinak in cun, kan tthannak vawlei aa lawhlo tikah, tuah kan duhmi zong aa dang ve.”



“Hi hman ka thlak mi a ruang cu, Kawlram in a rami Chin mipfun lawng te an si ca’h a si. Hi buffet hi a sau ngai—rawl le a tling. An duhmi poh an mahte in lak khawh a si. Duhmi poh ei khawh a si. Kawlram ah cun hi tihin kan ei kho nemmaam lo. Ka lung a thalo ngai, Kawlram ah cun, sa tehna hi a phawt tein phawt a si, a thlawm tete cio in a si cu muu.

“Mahhi ka hmuh tikah kaa lawmngai. Na duhmi poh nangmah tein na lakkhawh cuta. Meh thawthaw a tam fawn. A nuam bak ko. A sinain, kan ram ii kaltakmi hna kan mipfun hoi hna sinah hi rawl thaw hi cheuh ka duh ve hna, ka cheu kho hna lo. Khi tikah ka ngeih a chia than. Hika a ummi Chin tu cu rawl thatha an ei cang. Kaa lawmh ve tikah hi hman ka thlknak hi a si.”



“I took this picture because they are all Chin people from Burma. This buffet is so long—a lot of food. And what they want, they choose by themselves. What they like, they can eat. In Burma, we didn’t have anything like this. I feel sorry because when you eat in Burma, you can’t choose as you like, but they distribute little bitty things—the meat, the curry. It’s distributed, a little bit to each person.

When you eat in Burma, you can’t choose as you like...

“So when I see this one, I am very happy. Because what you want, you can take by yourself. We have a lot of fried foods. This way I am very happy. But a lot of Chin people are left in my country, my state. I want to share this food, but I cannot share it. This way, I feel sad. Now, a lot of Chin people can eat nice food. That’s why I’m so happy and I took this picture.”

-- San San , age 28





Hi piahpuai hi kan zapi i bomhchannak in a chuakmi a si. Chin miphun hoi he runkhat in, kei lengnu ka lenti tikah an mithmai a panhning le capo an thi-amning, riantuan an i zuamning, an chungkhar le an pipu nunphung an tleihchanning hna nih an sinah tleihchannak a ka ngeihter chin. Hi hmanthlak pawl hi thla -4 in thla-6 hrawng ka rau. A hlei in, lungthin-thazaang tanpi in hmanthlak a ka bawmmi hna Sophia, San San, Gideon le Helen sinah lunglawmh-nak tampi ka ngei. Digital camera pakhat cio ka pekhna ii, Indianapolis ii an nunning -tuanbia langhter an duhmi hmanthlak, thlak dingah ka sawm hna.

A hnu ah kan i tong than hna, hmanthlak pawl cu kan chek hna ii an mah duhmi tete pa 10-15 hrawng kan thim. Cun, ze i ruang thengah dah hihi na thlak timi, an chimmi an aw kha ka lak hna. Cu nih a chuahpimi cu, hi pali cio ii community nunning muisam a kengmi tuanbia dawhdawh “photo voice,” hmanthlak authawng tikha a si.

At Southport Public Library

◦ Photography Exhibit

October 27 to January 10

◦ Community Festival

November 6, 1 to 4 pm

Photos and cover photo: Anna Batcheller

If you drive down Madison Ave. in southern Indianapolis, stop for a minute at East Stop 11 Road and look around. You’ll see the Chin Community Center hiding around the corner, along with Chin Brothers Restaurant and Grocery. This is a neighborhood where more than 5,000 Chin people live. But who are the Chin people?

Originally from Burma in SE Asia, many people from Chin State fled the oppressive military regime to search for freedom. Some went to Malaysia, others to Thailand and India, but they got registered with the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and resettled in the United States. Because policy allows people to move where they have relatives, the Chin population in Indianapolis is growing exponentially. The U.S. federal government provides assistance until individuals and families can find jobs and stability.

In Indianapolis, that stability is often found in their community and in the thirteen large Chin Christian churches in the area. As I have become friends with many, I am drawn to their warm smiles, vibrant sense of humor, hard work ethic, and dedication to their families and culture.

The backstory

This exhibit is borne out of collaboration. I made some of these photos over the course of four to six months, but many thanks also go to Sophia, San San, Gideon and Helen for their enthusiasm and artistry. I gave each of them a digital camera and asked them to make photographs over two weeks that told stories of their lives in Indianapolis that they wanted to tell.

When we met again, we went through the photos together, and they chose 10 to 15 of their favorite images. Then I recorded their voices talking about why they made those particular photos and what was going on in them. The result is “photovoice,” beautiful and compelling stories by four of the individuals that make up this community.

Many thanks also to Christopher Bawi, Nancy Michael of Refugee Link, Za Bik of the Chin Community Center, Thiang Jeu Nu (Ni Vang), and many others who have contributed their voices and visions to “Neighbors from Burma.”

--Anna Batcheller

“We have been celebrating Chin National Day every year on February 20. A lot of people ask us why we celebrate Chin National Day in another country? Right now in Burma the problem is lack of democracy. We have no rights under military governments or any other governments. Their target is to become one nation, one ethnic group: that’s Burmans. And one language: that is Burmese. One religion: that is Buddhist.

“Right now there are more people outside of Chin State than people in Chin state. So we want to keep the spirit alive here, even in another country. And we also want to give that seed to our children. We are now fighting for democracy in Burma. So as long as we don’t get democracy, we have to tell our kids that we are still fighting. That’s what Chin National Day is about for now. We want to keep our culture and literature alive through our children. We want to keep our culture and practices here in the USA also—our culture and traditional dances, even wrestling.”

-- Za Bik, Chairman of the Chin Community Center



Photos: Anna Batcheller

“A tulio cu, Kawlram democracy dothlennak ca’h kan i zuamliopi a si. Democracy kan hmuhhlan lo cu, kan fa le hna sinah, hi ralpi kan dohlio rih dahfawh tihi kan chimpeng ko lai. Chin Miphunpi Ni zong nihhin hihi a langhter. Kan holh, kan ca le kan nunphung hna zong kan fa le nih nunpi hna seh tiah kan duh. U.S.A zong ah kan nunphun zalam le kan zaihla, kan lam le kan Laipeih te pawl zong thlaulo tein tuahpeng ko uhsih tihi kan duh.”

-- Za Bik



Neighbors from Burma

Images and stories from the Chin community

